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CHINESE LABOR COMPETITION ON THE PACIFIC COAST

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In discussing the question of Chinese competition in labor on the Pacific Coast it is ordinarily assumed that whenever a Chinaman enters any occupation he necessarily takes the place of an American or a European foreigner. But this does not at all correctly represent the true labor situation. The State of California, which contained three-fourths of the Chinese immigrants until after the exclusion law was passed, was settled by men drawn by the lure of gold, by adventurers and speculators of every class and nationality—industrial gamblers, in fact—who had no intention of earning a living there as laborers or domestics. They came to make no less than a fortune; and if they were driven to common tasks temporarily when their luck failed in mining or in the scarcely less hazardous business of provisioning camps and importing merchandise, they resented it and constituted, therefore, an exceptionally discontented and unstable laboring class. For almost a generation the stratum of society, which in any long-settled community is filled by those who cook, clean, wash and sew by those who perform the heavy, drudging labor fundamental to industrial development, was all but lacking. There were almost no women or youth who would work even at exorbitant wages, and until the Kearney period no considerable supply of common laborers. At times the vacuum was partially filled by those newly-arrived or down on their luck, but all of them would desert at the news of a new gold-strike or at the chance of any sort of promising speculation.

The Chinese laborers, therefore, coming almost exclusively from the free agricultural peasantry of Kwang Tung and Fukien, were welcome, and, being more enticed by the tales of high wages than by the golden adventure, fitted naturally into the labor vacuum left by men of more adventurous disposition. They became—what they still remain for the most part—gap-filers—assuming the

menial, petty and laborious work which white men would not do and for which their experience and their native characteristics especially prepared them.

The question has, furthermore, generally been discussed with reference to conditions existing in a few towns and the one large city, San Francisco; yet, during three decades of free immigration, a majority of the Chinamen were in the rural and mountain districts engaged in domestic, agricultural and general labor and in placer mining. In these sparsely populated and often very remote regions their services were acknowledged to be indispensable and only partly filled a demand which has never been supplied by native or foreign workers. Even in placer mining they worked chiefly the poor and abandoned claims which white men left untouched and rarely attempted to compete for the higher prizes of fortune.

During the first twenty years of California history there were, indeed, occasional anti-Chinese movements coincident with political campaigns, when candidates and agitators catered to the mining vote by appeals to a natural race antipathy which had been intensified by the reconstruction measures after the Civil War. But the objection to the Chinese in the earlier time was a phase of the initial struggle of the Americans against all foreigners for the control of the mines; and somewhat later took the form of a general apprehension of "an invasion of heathen hordes" rather than complaint of the competition of Oriental labor. Without rehearsing in detail the proofs, it may be stated finally that at this period the Chinese were a considerable and indispensable element in California progress and in no proper sense competitors of white labor. Even Mr. Samuel Gompers has granted that up to 1869 the presence of the Chinese "caused no serious alarm or discomfort to white labor."

But within the decade following the opening of the Central Pacific Railway the industrial conditions of the Far West were rapidly altered. The builders of the Southern Pacific, after employing every available white laborer at good wages, had been compelled to prepay the passages of thousands of Chinese immigrants in order to finish the road within the time required by Congress; and upon its completion ten thousand whites and Chinese were discharged upon the western labor market. Shortly afterward the greater ease of travel, the phenomenal mining stock sales and two successive years of abundant rainfall upon which mining and agricultural pros-

perity depended, greatly stimulated immigration from the eastern states. In 1868 and 1869 there came into the state 59,000 white immigrants—a number more than double the net increase of the ten years previous. The railway, instead of bringing in a general era of prosperity, as had been anticipated, opened California markets to eastern competition and at once reduced profits on local manufactures and commodities, while immigration precipitated the inevitable fall of wages, which had remained extraordinarily high as a consequence of isolation and the conditions of pioneer mining. Before western society had become readjusted to these disconcerting results of closer union with the world the panic of 1873 struck the eastern states and settled into a prolonged depression. The financial status of California, being established on a gold basis and chiefly supported by the mines, was not at first adversely or directly affected; but indirectly she began to share the disaster through the thousands of unemployed who had come from the stagnation of eastern cities to the land where gold and work were said to be still abundant.

Unfortunately, the white migrants were of a class of which the state already had an over-supply: factory workers, clerks, semi-skilled artisans, and men of low-grade city occupations. The records of the California Labor Exchange, which handled the greater part of the unemployed in San Francisco from 1868 to 1870, show that even in those thriving years there was an excessive supply of waiters, painters, dishwashers, grooms, porters, bookkeepers, salesmen, warehousemen and indoor workmen of all kinds, while there was an unfilled demand for heavy labor on construction works and farms, for lumbermen and machine blacksmiths, and for women and boys as cooks and helpers. Fifty per cent of the applicants were Irish, ten per cent English and Scotch, ten per cent German and only nineteen per cent native American, of whom a considerable number must have been of Irish or German parentage. The labor market continued to be recruited from men of no use in the country and most of whom would not go there even at wages much above those to which they had been accustomed.

About 1874 the inevitable fall of wages, so long postponed by abnormal conditions, began. Measured by the eastern standard, they were still high throughout the whole Kearney period. From the California standpoint they were falling terribly; and to the workingmen they seemed to threaten a less than living wage. In cooking,

sewing and laundry work they remained through the seventies practically stationary at three times the average eastern rate. In farm labor, though falling slowly, they averaged 33 per cent above the Middle West; while in those "services on the spot," which are slow to feel the effects of competition, they remained permanently far above the standard of older communities. The accompanying table, covering nineteen trades between 1870 and 1890, demonstrates the superiority of San Francisco conditions during the national depression:

COMPARISON OF MAXIMUM AND MINIMUM DAILY WAGES OF NINETEEN TRADES IN SAN FRANCISCO AND IN ELEVEN OTHER CITIES, 1870-1890.¹

TRADE.	11 cities.			Range in cents.	\$ Max. S. F.	\$ Min. S. F.	Range in cents.	Amt. by which min. of S. F. exceeds max. of 11 cities.
	Max.	Min.	11 cities.					
Blacksmiths	\$2.70	\$2.43	\$0.27	\$3.80	\$3.33	\$0.47	\$0.63	
Blacksmith's helpers ...	1.59	1.41	.18	2.34	2.09	.25	.50	
Boiler makers	2.69	2.41	.28	3.46	3.15	.31	.46	
Bricklayers	4.13	3.00	1.13	5.00	4.00	1.00	.13	
Carpenters	2.60	2.28	.32	3.85	3.09	.76	.49	
Compositors	2.82	2.64	.18	3.54	3.27	.27	.45	
Engineers (R. R.)	4.02	3.49	.53	4.79	4.53	.26	.51	
Firemen (R. R.)	2.03	1.75	.28	3.06	2.54	.52	.51	
Hod carriers	2.20	1.58	.62	3.00	2.35	.65	.15	
Iron molders	2.79	2.36	.43	3.71	3.40	.31	.61	
Laborers (street)	1.63	1.45	.18	2.50	2.00	.50	.37	
Laborers (general)	1.57	1.40	.17	2.00	1.97	.03	.40	
Machinists	2.52	2.22	.30	3.36	2.95	.41	.43	
Masons (stone)	3.62	2.81	.81	5.00	4.83	.17	.21	
Painters	2.66	2.16	.50	3.72	3.00	.72	.34	
Pattern makers	2.98	2.68	.30	3.89	3.15	.74	.17	
Plumbers	3.15	2.79	.36	3.69	3.55	.14	.40	
Stone cutters	3.64	2.66	.98	4.11	3.66	.45	.02	
Teamsters	1.95	1.71	.25	2.67	2.62	.05	.67	
Averages	\$2.69	\$2.27	\$0.42	\$3.55	\$3.13	\$0.89	\$0.39	

It appears that during twenty years the minimum average wage in San Francisco in eighteen of nineteen trades exceeded the maxi-

¹Reprinted from Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (in press).

Bul. 18, U. S. Dept. of Labor, 1898. Rearranged.

mum average wage in eleven other cities, the total average excess amounting to thirty-nine cents per day per trade. Nor was this excess diminished by an appreciable difference in the cost of living.

Nevertheless, during this very period there occurred the labor outbreak known as Kearneyism, whose animus was concentrated upon the rich, monopolistic corporations and upon the Chinese. The movement was in fact a reflection of the wider national labor agitation, and had its origin in a network of local industrial grievances. The demand for labor was erratic and its conditions unstable. When the eastern depression finally made itself felt in California the check upon industry was intensified by drought, and to the thousands of eastern unemployed were added more than the normal number of those who in the West are usually out of work from December to March. A large number of the immigrants were such as could not have found work in California even in prosperous times, and a study of the principal industries suggests that the situation was greatly aggravated by the extremely intermittent character of all rural employments. As the rainy season came on the placer miners, both white and Chinese, returned to the valley towns and to the coast. Farm laborers had work only from March to July or August and a few for the short plowing season in early winter, after which they, too, drifted into San Francisco. All the industries dependent on mining and farming suffered the same seasonal contraction. The failure of winter rainfall, just before the Kearney uprising, resulted in widespread unemployment and consequent congestion of workers in San Francisco. Then, as now, during the winter months, certain streets were thronged with idle and disgruntled men, among whom the agitator and the demagogue found ready listeners. Chinatown as well was filled up with miners, fishermen and laborers, to whom were added in February and March the usual quota of spring immigrants from Hongkong. Men are not logical when their wages are falling or when they are unemployed—the mere juxtaposition of thousands of both races, even though many of them would find abundant and well-paid work in the country at the opening of the next spring, made it seem evident that there must be intense competition. Yet the recurring congestion and lack of work was due to climatic and economic conditions with which the Chinamen had nothing to do.

During the seventies the Chinese had been gradually shifting
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from the mining to the agricultural and urban counties, until, in 1880, about one-third of the whole number were in towns, and from 20,000 to 25,000 in San Francisco at various seasons. It has been shown that if there was competition anywhere, it was in manufacture, and in the principal city where such factory industries as there were chiefly existed. In a pamphlet entitled "Meat *vs.* Rice," published by the American Federation of Labor, eight industries are specifically mentioned as the most important of those from which the Chinese had driven white labor. Only three of them, however, employed Chinamen in any considerable numbers and turned out sufficient product to merit any examination. The boot and shoe industry, the woolen industry and cigar-making are the manufactures frequently named in anti-Chinese literature as unquestionable examples of severe competition, and should, therefore, be individually studied.

In the boot and shoe industry there were engaged in the seventies from 1,500 to 2,500 persons, of whom 26 per cent were Irish, 21 per cent Americans and 19 per cent each Germans and Chinese. The competition, it is evident, must have been between the Irish and German foreigners on the one hand and the Oriental foreigners on the other, if, as is usual, the overseers and foremen were Americans. This manufacture, begun as the result of the superior quality of hides and leather in California, suffered a sudden check upon the finishing of the railway because of the opening of the home market to eastern producers. Although leather was relatively cheap, it was shipped east, manufactured and shipped back, and sold at a greater profit than could be made on home manufactured goods. From two-thirds to three-fourths of the goods manufactured by the Chinese in San Francisco were made in Chinese shops and sold to their countrymen, the product being principally coarse boots and shoes for laborers and cheap slippers. It was said that they never could make fine footwear, but it may be that they, too, found competition with eastern-made goods unprofitable. The Knights of Saint Crispin, a union of shoemakers newly organized in the West, demanded that the manufacturers employ white labor; but when, under the intimidation of Kearneyism, the substitution was agreed to, it was found necessary to send east for operatives. Nor did wages ever fall to the eastern level except in those operations where the Chinese took the places of the women and children so largely employed in eastern factories after the introduction of shoe machinery. It is clear that

a local industry, 48 per cent of whose operatives in the east were women, must have had some considerable advantages to maintain itself. As a matter of fact, California had only a cheaper raw material and Chinese labor—which was paid about the same as women elsewhere—to oppose to the generally cheaper labor and much cheaper fuel and capital of eastern producers. Even with its local advantages the industry thrrove only for a short time, and the Chinese manufacture in Chinese shops declined as rapidly as the American. In 1870 this industry ranked fourth in the state; by 1893 its production had declined to less than half what it had been, and at present it has not even a place among the sixteen leading industries.

The woolen industry has a similar history. Established in 1867 by a Scotchman because of the superiority of California wool, it employed at its height about 1,000 operatives. It was never able to compete with the eastern product in certain lines and in the others only paid dividends after the Chinese began to be employed. California was employing only one woman and one youth to nineteen men (both white and Chinese), while the other states were employing in this manufacture one woman and one child to every two to five men. A comparison of the wages of different classes of employees, from 1867 to 1880, in the East and the Far West shows that the total average wage of the eight classes in which Chinese were engaged was exactly the same as of the same classes in seven other states; while the average of nine other classes in which white men were employed was one dollar per day higher in California than elsewhere. Even with Chinese labor the wages of California woolen factories never reached the lower level of the East. Between 1880 and 1890 the industry began to decline, the number employed fell from 819 to 125, and its product dwindled from \$1,700,000 to \$350,000.

The third trade, cigar-making, in which the Chinese are said to have superseded Americans has had almost as disastrous a history. Established in the West by Germans, in 1870 it was employing from 2,000 to 2,500 persons and a few years later perhaps twice as many. It had fallen almost wholly into the hands of the Chinese and the scale of wages was about ten per cent less than those of eastern and southern establishments. In 1877 the statistics of seventeen white firms in San Francisco, most of them German, show a total of 263 Chinese earning \$2.75 per day; and 133 more \$3.00 per day;

while 2,800 Chinese were employed by Chinese manufacturers at fifty cents to \$1.25 per day and board. In 1878, at the demand of the White Labor League, most of the white firms agreed to replace all Chinese with white labor at union wages in order to give the unemployed work. It was at once disclosed that there were very few cigar makers out of work in San Francisco and the unions sent East for several hundred men, many of whom ultimately returned to the East or left the trade for more alluring occupations in California. In spite of the gradual re-engagement of many Chinese the industry rapidly declined, owing, it is said, to the severe competition of Eastern tenement-house and Cuban labor. As in the case of the shoe industry, the Chinese manufacture also declined, and in 1891, the Hong Tuck Tong—Chinese Cigar Makers' Union—had only one-fourth as many members as formerly.

The history of these three factory industries in which the Chinese were largely employed, and of many small ones, shows that, except in cigar-making, wages did not reach the level of Eastern manufacture. The relatively low wages in them were probably due to the narrow margin of profit and to the impossibility of permanent success under local conditions. It does not appear that any number of white men were displaced by Chinese; but undoubtedly the presence of a large number of white immigrants unfitted for California occupations, as well as of Chinese who could be had more cheaply, hastened the fall of wages from the pioneer standard to a level approaching that of the rest of the country. Yet without the Chinese some of these manufactures would not have survived at all. If it be contended that white men were driven to accept "Chinese wages" still the inexorable fact of Eastern competition has to be reckoned with. The unanswerable fact is that whereas these three manufactures once ranked among the leading ones of the state, their combined product in 1906 was not as much as that of one of its sixteen principal industries. If the Chinese excluded white labor from them originally then it may now be argued that the exclusion of the Chinese has killed the industries. But neither hypothesis can be sustained; rather we must suppose that certain kinds of manufacture in California were premature and their decline due to causes only remotely connected with the labor supply.

One other contention—that the Chinese took the places of women and boys—may be briefly considered, although it scarcely seems

to require demonstration that in a region where there were, even in 1880, only three females to five males of all races; and only one child of school age to every three or four adults, such women and youth as wished to work could not fail to find work when there was work for anyone. During the Kearney period women constituted less than six per cent of the total number in gainful occupations; and about fifty per cent of those in the sewing trades in which the Chinese were ten per cent. The wages of women in every line of household labor and in the sewing trades were and have remained far higher than anywhere else in the United States. It is true that Chinamen performed a large part of the domestic labor in California, but always at wages higher than those of women and with an ever-rising demand, until at present a Chinese cook is a luxury that only the rich can afford.

In the discussion of Chinese labor competition only two conspicuous qualities of the Chinese laborer himself are commonly mentioned: his thrift and his laborious patience; yet he has several other characteristics of even greater pertinence to the question. Free Chinese labor never remains "cheap" for any great length of time. In California the Chinamen are receiving on the average twice as much in wages as in 1882 and more than similar classes of naturalized Europeans. They are not only organized more thoroughly and minutely into unions than Americans but they have an adaptability and a keenness which enable them to distribute themselves quickly to the districts and the occupations where competition is least and wages highest. They have left factory labor and washing because wages were too low, although the Chinese laundrymen are paying twice the wages they paid twenty years ago. In fact among the fifty or sixty thousand remaining in California, most of whom were originally laborers, a majority are now the owners of small independent businesses or employed in coöperative undertakings. In Hawaii, where the Chinese are preferred to any other class of common labor, it is the complaint that the Chinamen will not remain laborers and now expect to make white men's profits in their business enterprises.

Again, it is a mistake to suppose that the Chinaman lives penitulously on rice and wholly without meat. He does, indeed, live within his income, but, because of his industry, intelligent ambition and thrift, he generally has money in his pocket, and no man likes to

spend it for good food and for pleasures more than he. Professor Jaffa has concluded from an exhaustive study of the dietaries of three groups of Chinese—washmen, truck-gardeners and students,—that their food is quite as nutritious and more varied than that of white workingmen, small tradesmen and farm-hands in the same region. The somewhat lower cost he attributes to less wasteful habits and greater skill in preparation, on the part of the Orientals. The ability to cook, sew and wash for himself, as the white laborer can seldom do satisfactorily, is also a considerable advantage both to the employer and to the Chinaman in the homeless life he leads. His native thrift and his moderation both in his pleasures and his vices enable him to endure with less danger of degeneration the effects of intermittent employment.

The enumeration of the Chinese laborer's industrial virtues would seem to render him a dangerous competitor of the white laborer, but as a matter of fact he never became one, except to an infinitesimal degree in California, partly because of the lack of any other distinct laboring class in number sufficient to supply the ever-increasing demand, and partly because of the intelligent ambition of the Chinaman himself, which soon took him out of the laboring class. Certain personal characteristics also prevented him from attempting competition in lines where aggressiveness was required. The Chinaman, though keen and industrious and saving, is timid and conservative, intelligently preferring moderate wages in peace to a job which he must fight for. He is usually a married man with a wife and parents in China, to whom he will be devoted throughout the enforced absence of years and to whom he will return as soon as he has saved enough capital to insure a comfortable business at home. When he remains here and brings over a wife, he may not lose his native characteristics, but he will try to raise his children by education into a higher class and insist upon making good Americans of them.

From the time of the Scott act (1888), when the Chinese laborers in California began to decline perceptibly in numbers, there have been many attempts to fill their places. Except immediately after the panic of 1893, there has been a temporary and in some localities a permanent "labor famine" every season, while wages have been rising. The substitutes for the vanishing Chinamen are vari-colored—Negroes, Apache and Yaqui Indians, Mexicans and

Cholos, Italians, Greeks, Austrians and Portuguese, Hawaiians and Hindoos, Porto Ricans, Filipinos, and lastly Japanese. Since the work of California must be done somehow and by someone, it may be questioned whether the dangers of Chinese competition in labor are greater than those likely to be encountered from most of these other races, whose assimilative power is even less than that of the Chinaman, and who certainly have far less industrial efficiency.